

## YORK COUNTY - HOLDING ON TO HOPE

*Carving a path through the fear of domestic violence, this York County woman continues to struggle for a better life for herself and her five children*

"It didn't begin that way," Loretta said, her voice tired from the stress of endless days consumed with working four jobs.

"I should have seen something. Like the way he treated his mom," she reflected on the months before her marriage.

But domestic violence seldom provides clues of its fury before the wedding vows.

And Loretta wasn't looking for clues, she didn't see the need. Her childhood hadn't experienced those kind of harsh memories. She simply wanted to embrace the same values her parents had sown in their marriage.

Following her high school graduation Loretta had enrolled in the Lincoln School of Commerce, but she found college boring and headed to Houston, Texas.

"My boyfriend lived there," she said. "I liked it there. I worked for an oil company as a secretary. Then I got my car stolen and my apartment was vandalized, so I called my dad, left my boyfriend in Texas and came back."

Loretta moved in with her parents and got a job in Lincoln. A couple of years later she met her husband. They dated for a year and married in 1983.

Loretta had been used to the security of her father's work ethics, but that wasn't the case with her new husband. He went from job to job. He'd been offered good employment, like the position his father-in-law got for him with a construction company, but he walked out on that one, too.

Meantime, the couple had their first child. What should have provided a happy chapter to their marriage proved to be the beginning of a nightmare.

"The abuse started after our first child and I should have left then," Loretta reflected. "He'd get mad and call me lazy because I didn't have a job. He told me he was going to go out and get me one."

Wanting to be loyal to her wedding vows, Loretta continued to try and make the marriage work: "I felt like, I'm married. I have to stay married."

Four more children were added to the family, yet life continued in a downward spiral of abuse -- most of it verbal in the early years while Loretta's parents were alive. She would often find refuge in her parent's home; however, "I never really talked about it," she said. "I was just brought up that way."

The couple were married 16 years by the time both of Loretta's parents died. As her father lay dying, he lined his children up to tell them one by one what he thought of them. When Loretta's turn came, she silently feared her father would not be proud of her, but the opposite proved to be true: "He told me I was the one that raised my five children." The satisfaction she felt in her father's words lifted the self-esteem she so badly needed.

AFTER LORETTA'S FATHER died, the abuse worsened. Although she had always spared her parents the heartache of the details of her harmful environment, she no longer had the protection of her parent's home to flee to.

Battering is not about anger or losing control. It is a choice, an intentional choice, that focuses on maintaining control and power in a relationship. When angry, a batterer can manage not to abuse friends or employers. Abuse tends to begin verbally, unreasonable jealousy or shoving. Unless there is some type of intervention, the violence tends to escalate.

Loretta knows this truth first hand. "I wasn't allowed to wear make-up. And he didn't want me driving. If we went out with friends he would want us to go home if I was having a good time."

The verbal abuse developed into physical. It became so bad Loretta recalls a time her daughter called the sheriff. "He had me by the neck and was going to throw me down the basement. It wasn't the first time. I used to get hit over the head with cookie sheets and pushed up against the wall.

"Then he played the mind game with me. Because everything was my fault, I got yelled at. If I was watching TV he'd come in and tell me to get supper on the table. One night he flipped the recliner over me. He told me he wasn't going to touch me because he was told if he put marks on me he would go to jail, so that was his way of hurting me without touching me."

The couple tried counseling, but only because Loretta's husband was ordered to do so by the court. "He always started (the abuse) on our oldest boy. When we went to counseling they asked him if he seen himself in his son. He said 'yes,' and I didn't even know that he went through that until we were married."

Although the abuser is responsible for the violence -- not the victim -- dependence on the abuser for shelter, food and other necessities or the fear of losing their children are only a few of the reasons victims stay in the relationship. About 50 percent of battered women say they stay with their partner because they do not feel they can support themselves and their children.\*

Statistics show that many victims leave an average of seven times before they are able to leave permanently, knowing that there is a possibility they will be in even greater danger if they leave.

Despite almost paralyzing fear, Loretta made the decision to place her children above her safety. "I thought maybe I can stay until the oldest one graduates, but it's going to be a long battle." But Loretta knew she couldn't wait that long when, one day, her husband began yelling at their oldest son, calling him lazy. "That was the pivotal point. You don't do that to a ten-year-old boy. I told him to knock it off. He told me if I didn't shut up he'd start on me. (My son and I) sat on the couch for a half-hour after that. I said (to myself), I have to get out of here.

"I had also been told (by the sheriff) that if one of the kids got hurt I would lose them because I was there and watched it, so I had to leave. I probably wouldn't be here if I hadn't walked out. Lot of people ask why did I stay that long. You have to have a plan. I thought about it for a long time. I couldn't tell (my husband) I was leaving or he'd beat me up or do something to the car so I couldn't get away. I called my brother. He told me he didn't know it was that bad -- nobody does. I told the kids a week before we left and not to say anything to their dad."

The plan took two years to prepare. Loretta established a day care, knowing it would be a main source of support after the divorce. She also rented a house, got a loan to buy a van in her name only and let the sheriff know of her plans so the local authorities could keep a close eye on her house.

Then came the day Loretta put her plan into action. Her brother arrived to help and they moved quickly: "(The day we left) I loaded some things up, and I knew I had (only) so many hours to get out of that house."

SHE WAS ON her way to a violence-free life, but there weren't many options to explore when it came to financial support. "I went through a terrible divorce; I couldn't afford a lawyer." She did manage to hire a lawyer with the meager funds she had, but after spending the \$500 still got not help. The lawyer wanted more money so Loretta did the only thing she could: she defended herself. Yet, without the aid of a lawyer, she was easy prey. "(My husband) kept dragging me back into court. He didn't want custody of the children so I was glad of that, but he said he couldn't work and wouldn't pay child support. Then he filed bankruptcy so all the bills got put on me. The credit cards were in my name so I got stuck owing thousands of dollars."

Three out of four Nebraska women live from paycheck to paycheck, \*\* and Loretta was no exception.

With five children and no child support, she needed more than one paycheck to survive. Rent costs \$500 a month, and there is always food, clothing, car insurance, car payments and repairs, and other bare necessities, some of which she had had to borrow money for -- plus the credit card debt her husband charged up. "You just do what you have to do or your children don't have anything," said the hard working 48-year-old mom. "I've been a thousand dollars in the hole in my checking account."

Her day starts early. She's up by 5 a.m. and at her daycare from 5:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., often having up to 20 children to care for which her daughter and other workers help with. She remarks: "It's my main income. If I didn't have the daycare, I don't know what I would do."

From there she heads to a nearby town to work at Dollar General, putting in 23 hours a week. She gets off anywhere from 9 to 9:30 p.m. but she can't go home yet. From there she "squeezes in" two cleaning jobs. Because they are at businesses, she sometimes can't get in until 10 p.m. to clean, which means getting home after midnight.

When it came time to buy her daughter's prom dress, there was no money to go shopping for one, so Loretta bought the material and made it: "I do an all night project to make a dress. I didn't have the money to buy a dress so I bought the material for about \$38."

LORETTA'S OLDEST SON is now 21 and on his own, but the hurt of the past abuse is still something his mother keeps a close eye on: "I told my son don't ever treat a woman like your father treated me because I'll come and get you," she laughed, still maintaining a sense of humor in the midst of the struggle. She is currently getting only \$150 a month disability for three children, still a raise from the \$50 she used to get for all five. Two of the children will be off to college soon, possible only through scholarships and grants. The youngest child is 16.

Just recently Loretta began getting some child support. "I don't even know why," she stated with surprise, but she's cautious to build up her hopes, knowing the support could cease as quickly as it arrived.

Loretta has been divorced now for seven years. The financial battle seems as though there's no light at the end of life's tunnel; however, she has earned the pride and admiration of her children.

"My children have had to learn how to cook, clean, hang out clothes and do everything around the house. I feel sorry for them sometimes. But my oldest daughter told me one time, 'Mom, I just can't believe everything that you do'."

She also has the admiration of women around her who are still leading lives of abuse: "People have told me they wish they had the guts to do what I did."

If you asked this hard-working Nebraska heroine what she misses the most, it wouldn't be the computer they can't afford or being able to go to a movie and get a pizza. "I missed a lot of my kid's football games and school activities," she says, holding back tears. "We can't ever sit down together for a meal unless it's on holidays because that's the only time I'm home. I'm never home because I'm always working."

She often wonders if she will ever find her way out of debt, but the distant dream of owning her own home some day still remains alive.

And while she waits for that dream to happen, she's regained something even more valuable: her self-worth.

"When I was going through the abuse, I thought to myself, 'I have to be the way I was before I got into all this mess ... and I did it,'" she smiled with a fresh twinkle in her eye.

\* [www.friendshiphome.org/html/dv/stats.htm](http://www.friendshiphome.org/html/dv/stats.htm)

\*\* Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women [www.women.ne.gov](http://www.women.ne.gov)

#### DID YOU KNOW?

\* 1,667 arrests were made for offenses against family and children in Nebraska in 2004. 1

\* Domestic violence contributed to 46% of the 30 child deaths in Nebraska occurring between 1998 and 2003 according to the Governor's Children's Task Force. 2

\* During fiscal year 1999-2000, battered women who received assistance from Nebraska's network of domestic violence/sexual assault programs reported that more than 80% of their children witnessed the violence. 3

\* 98.4 percent of the individuals served by Nebraska's domestic violence/sexual assault programs in 2003-2004 were women and children. 4

1. Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice. Crime in Nebraska: Preliminary 2004 Report

2. Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition. Statewide Report 2003-2004.

3. Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition. Domestic Violence: How Common Is It?

4. Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition. Statewide Report 2003-2004